

WHY SOME PRAYERS DON'T GET THE ANSWER YOU WANT 1 JOHN 5:14-15

When Christian author and psychologist, Larry Crabb, was 10, he first heard Matthew 21:22, where Jesus, who never lies, said, "If you believe, you will receive whatever you ask for in prayer." It was the "whatever" model of prayer—believe, ask for whatever you want, and it's yours. Larry ran outside, stood in his driveway, closed his eyes really tight and prayed: God, I want to fly like Superman. And I believe you can do it. So I'll jump, and you take it from there. Larry jumped four times—and each time landed half a second later and half a foot farther down the driveway. He had believed. He had asked. Just like Jesus said. But he didn't receive. Larry Crabb said that began his 50-year journey of confusion about prayer. Today, I want you to think with me about unanswered prayer. Trying to figure out why some prayers don't get the answer we want can indeed be more than confusing.

This is the first message of three on prayer I want to share with you this month. The title of the message series itself is *You're Too Busy Not To Pray*. Busyness. That's the number one reason Christians give for not praying often enough or at all. The logic behind that lame excuse is pretty apparent. The Bible makes it clear prayer is the key to experiencing God in our lives constantly. Experiencing God is something none of us can afford to live without. So, the busy demands upon our lives should drive us to God all the more - not push us away. Oh, yes, all of us are terribly busy people. Busy, busy, busy! But you can never be too busy to pray. Actually, you're too busy not to pray. Our busyness should drive us to God which means we will be driven to pray.

Why speak to you over three Sundays on prayer? I want to grow my own prayer life and one of the best ways to do that is for me to prepare messages about it. It forces me to read about prayer, to think about prayer, and to pray. Prayer is an important part of the KRBC picture of a disciple: ROPES. We believe following Jesus means being involved intentionally in relationships – with God and others (R), obedience to God, (O), evangelism (E), and Scripture (S). The P in ROPES stands for prayer. Disciples find ways to make prayer a growing, more vital part of their daily lives as they follow Jesus.

So, why is it that some of our prayers don't get the answer we want? Unanswered prayers can be frustrating, irritating, and disillusioning. We say to ourselves, "Well, if God's not going to answer my prayers, then why pray at all?" Our Bible passage this morning gives us part of the answer to this perplexing question. Let's read it now. Now, the ultimate reason why some of our prayers don't receive the answer we want is clearly stated in those verses. They don't match up with God's will. God can't and won't answer a prayer that's contrary to His will. But let's break that big, general answer down into some smaller, specific ones. First...

IF MY REQUEST IS WRONG, GOD SAYS "NO."

God answers every prayer. After all, no is an answer. But He doesn't always give us the answer we want. There are a couple of examples in the Bible. On one occasion, Jesus took three of his followers - Peter, James, and John - up to the top of a mountain.

There, before their eyes, He literally began to shine like the sun. Moses and Elijah, two important Old Testament characters, appeared with Jesus. Peter was so impressed and overwhelmed by this event he wanted to build little huts or sheds for everyone so they could just stay there forever presumably. Jesus denied Peter's request. It was both foolish and wrong. On another occasion, the same James and John – along with their mom - approached Jesus asking to be given positions of prominence and importance once Jesus' Kingdom was established. They saw themselves as having some key leadership role in some future hierarchy. Jesus' response to their silly, selfish request was definite. He said, "You don't know what you are asking!" (Jo. 20:22 NLT) In other words, no! I wonder if the Lord sometimes says the same thing about some of our prayer requests: "You don't know what you are asking." Probably.

So, what makes a prayer request wrong? First, a request can be wrong because God already knows what we're asking will not bring us what is good ultimately. Only God can see the end result of every prayer we pray. If He knows an answer to prayer will bring us harm somewhere down the road, He's too loving to say yes. Here's an example. We pray, "Lord, please help me get that job." Is it appropriate to ask God for employment? Certainly! It's always God's will for you to support yourself and your family financially. But that job – that specific job – which looks so promising, so perfect, and so wonderful today may actually be the wrong one for you down the road. It might bring harm to you. Or, God might have an even better job planned for you.

Second, a request can be wrong simply because it's short-sighted. We don't know what's going to actually happen in the next hour. God alone knows everything past, present, and future. Let's say your adult children want to accept a job offer that will take them miles and miles away from you or one of your children wants to go far away to college. You dread the inability to interact with precious loved ones that physical distance creates. Often those kinds of decisions will be different than what we prayed for. God might well have a long range purpose we can't see or understand right now. Is it wrong to pray about such matters? No, but it wasn't wrong for God to deny it either. We just have to trust God to do the right thing because He knows what's for the best in the long run. In comparison to God's perspective, we are very short-sighted. When we don't get the answers to prayer we want, we have to learn to trust God even more.

Third, a request can be wrong simply because it can't grasp the mystery of God's will. I'm thinking of all those things we find so hard to understand and accept: a child suffering from some dreadful disease, a child who dies, natural disasters that cause so much misery and heartache, godly parents who have children who could care less about Jesus, how divorce negatively affects innocent people, or how good, godly people sometimes suffer unspeakable tragedies and losses. Why does an all-loving, all-powerful God deny absolutely valid requests for help, for intervention, and for deliverance from fully devoted followers of Jesus? Why does God seem deaf at times?

There's no complete answer that will satisfy everyone. Yes, we live in a world where sin and all of its terrible effects and consequences still exist. The Bible also makes it clear

Satan and the powers of evil are still very active and real. Even though one day Satan and evil will be no more, right now he can still cause much suffering. And he does. The Bible says not everything and everyone has submitted yet to the Lordship of Jesus. In addition, it also says, “For we live by believing and not by seeing.” (2 Cor. 5:7 NLT) Some of our prayers might not be fully answered until we get to Heaven and start to enjoy eternity. It’s there – not here – after all, that God promises to wipe away all crying, all pain, and to put an end to death itself. Why don’t some of our prayers get the answer we want? Here’s another answer,

IF MY TIMING IS WRONG, GOD SAYS “SLOW.”

Our timing can be off when it comes to prayer. When that happens, God’s answer is “Slow.” We’ve all been kids at some point in our lives. Many of us have had children of our own. Kids don’t like to wait. Kids don’t like to delay gratification. Kids resist being patient. Whatever they want, they want it NOW! If you’re a parent, you’ve experienced your child’s whining, tears, or anger – or sometimes all three at once – simply because you said, “Not yet.” You didn’t say, “No.” You said, “Not yet.”

There’s an impatient child in all of us who wants God to meet every need, grant every request, and move every mountain right now. A wise parent isn’t intimidated by a child’s demand for instant gratification. By the same token, you can be very sure that your Heavenly Father, the Great or Ultimate Parent, is no less wise. He has His reasons for saying, “No yet. Wait. Go slow.” God Himself says in the Bible, “My thoughts are nothing like your thoughts. And my ways are far beyond anything you could imagine. For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts.” (Is. 55:8-9 NLT)

When it comes to prayer, God’s delays aren’t necessarily God’s denials. But He doesn’t feel compelled to explain why He’s delaying your answer either. I admit that can be terribly frustrating, but I haven’t been able to get God to change His ways! So, why does God sometimes say, “Not yet. Wait. Slow”? One reason is delays allow God to test our faith. God wants to test my faith? Absolutely. Think of testing our faith in terms of developing our faith. The Bible puts it like this, “So be truly glad. There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you must endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold—though your faith is far more precious than mere gold. So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world.” (1 Pt. 1:6-7 NLT) God already knows the result of any test He puts us through, so the test is for our benefit not His. Do you see God as a heavenly vending machine or as a loving, wise Father who knows what’s best? Will you walk out on God if He doesn’t answer your prayers your way or will you trust Him for the long haul? How we react to God’s delays reveal all that and more.

Another reason God delays answers to prayer is to give us an opportunity to modify our request. When you faithfully and earnestly bring a need before God over and over

again, you might find that your request wasn't right or maybe it needed to be altered or adjusted in some way to bring it in line with God's will. A delay in answering our prayers allows the Holy Spirit the opportunity to shape, mold, and even modify our prayers.

Yet another reason God delays answering a prayer request is simply to develop godly character qualities in you and me. Like what? Like endurance, trust, patience, and submission to Him. Isn't it strange how we think at times? We want to be strong, trusting, patient, submissive followers of Jesus, but we can so fiercely resist the means by which we develop those qualities. How do you gain endurance? You face situations and circumstances that tempt you to give up and give in. How do you learn trust? You get put in places where you're tempted to doubt. How do you become patient? God puts you with people or into situations where your first response is impatience. And how do you develop a submissive spirit before God? It's when we face times where we're strongly tempted to take matters into our own hands. Developing a godly character means dealing with disappointment, hurt, and heartache. Why don't some of our prayers get the answer we want? Here's another answer...

IF I'M WRONG, GOD SAYS "GROW."

God certainly does invite us to come to Him with all of our needs, but often there are issues we need to clear up with Him beforehand. When your life or mine is wrong, God says, "Before I grant your request, I want you to grow. Get rid of that sin. Change your attitude. Stop that foolish habit. End that pattern of behavior. Reconcile that relationship. Soften up your spirit. Repent. Receive forgiveness." In other words, "Grow." Here are a few "prayer busters" – things that can show up in any of our lives - that stall or prevent God's answers to prayer.

One, prayerlessness. The Bible says, "Yet you don't have what you want because you don't ask God for it." (Jam. 4:2 NLT) Why are we – so often – just prayerless? Sometimes we can be too comfortable with our lives and we just don't feel the need to connect with God relationally. Busyness, again. Prayerlessness can sometimes be the result of failing to establish the habit of prayer. We just don't build it into the rhythm of our daily lives. We never get around to prayer with any kind of regularity. If we fail to bring a request before God with purpose, with fervency, with expectancy, and with persistence, is it a surprise God concludes we aren't really all that serious about it?

Two, unconfessed sin. It might be the biggest prayer buster of all. The Bible says, "It's your sins that have cut you off from God. Because of your sins, he has turned away and will not listen anymore." (Is. 59:2 NLT) It also says, "If I had not confessed the sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened." (Ps. 66:18 NLT) Suppose you walk next door to borrow your neighbor's lawn mower. As you cross the yard, his annoying dog charges you nipping and yapping at your heels. You respond with a well-aimed kick in the dog's ribs and he goes yelping off in pain. Then, you look up and see your neighbor standing there on his porch with his arms crossed looking a tad peeved. Is that a good time to ask to borrow his lawn mower? Is there anything you might want to clear up

before you ask? Any time you come into God's presence, confess any sin you know you've committed. Ask and receive God's forgiveness. Only then, make your request.

Three, unresolved conflict with other people. Jesus said, "If you enter your place of worship and, about to make an offering, you suddenly remember a grudge a friend has against you, abandon your offering, leave immediately, go to this friend and make things right. Then and only then, come back and work things out with God." (Mt. 5:23-24 MSG) There's another really interesting verse that touches on this prayer buster. "Be good husbands to your wives. Honor them, delight in them. As women they lack some of your advantages. But in the new life of God's grace, you're equals. Treat your wives, then, as equals so your prayers don't run aground." (1 Pt. 3:7 MSG) If I treat anyone with contempt, rudeness, lack of respect, or unkindness, God is less inclined to answer my prayers. Sure, some people don't want to make peace with you. God knows that as well and takes it into account. Here's the question we need to ask ourselves and answer honestly. Am I the obstacle of reconciliation? Am I content to just let the conflict continue unaddressed? Do I want my relationship with this person restored?

Prayer buster number four. Selfishness. The Bible says, "And even when you ask, you don't get it because your motives are all wrong—you want only what will give you pleasure." (Jam. 4:3 NLT) Think about your prayer requests. Do they tend to sound like this? "Dear Lord, take away every problem in my life. Make everything work out for me. Please save me from any and every hard time, any tragedy, any pain whatsoever and especially anything that might make me grow spiritually and become a man or woman of God. Dear Lord, please give me a convenient, happy, satisfying, problem-free life." OK, I'm exaggerating, but I hope you get the point. Prayer is less about asking God for what we want and more about learning to want what God wants for us.

A fifth prayer buster. Uncaring attitudes toward other people. The Bible says, "Those who shut their ears to the cries of the poor will be ignored in their own time of need." (Pro. 21:13 NLT) If your ear and your hand is open to other people in need, God will keep His ear and His hand open to you and your needs. Here's a final prayer buster. Inadequate faith. The Bible puts it like this, "But when you ask him, be sure that your faith is in God alone. Do not waver.... Such people should not expect to receive anything from the Lord." (Jam. 1:6-7 NLT) Don't insult the Lord. When you bring a need before God, do it fervently, expectantly, and faithfully or just don't bring it up at all. Expect Him to do something. Well, let's close on a positive note, shall we?

IF MY REQUEST IS RIGHT, MY TIMING IS RIGHT, AND I'M RIGHT, GOD SAYS, "GO."

To summarize, if my request is wrong, God says, "No." If my timing is wrong, God says, "Slow." If I'm wrong, God says, "Grow." But if we're right in those three areas, God says, "Go." We will get the answer we were wanting and seeking.

Having said that, however, some of you might be asking questions I've certainly asked. "Why pray, then? If God's will is going to be accomplished whether or not I pray, why

pray at all? Or why bother with prayer if my request has to be right, my timing has to be right, or I need to be right? How often will that happen?” Here’s two reasons to keep on praying. First, it’s the only way God provides His children to get what we need. God ordains the end result, true enough, but He also ordains the means to the end. That’s prayer. If you expect to receive much of anything from God as you live your life, learn how to pray and learn how to pray in the right way. Second, we make ourselves instruments of God’s will and purpose through prayer. The Holy Spirit often puts it into our hearts and minds to pray for specific people or situations. And then we see God answer those prayers. And, so it is that God accomplishes His will in and through our prayers. Could He do it without our prayers? Of course, but He’s chosen to do it through our prayers. Through prayer, God invites us to partner with Him to do His will.

Hang in there. Keep on praying. As we get better at learning how to ask for the right things at the right time, and when we are right with God, God will answer more and more of our requests. What’s going to motivate you and me to develop a more robust prayer life? Answered prayer! When you ask God to meet a need and He does it, you will be motivated to pray again. When you pray for someone’s salvation and they accept Jesus as Savior, you will be motivated to pray again. When you ask God for guidance in making a difficult decision and He provides it, you will be motivated to pray again. Nothing motivates us to keep on praying more than answered prayer. So keep at it. The Bible says, “Jesus told his disciples... that they should always pray and never give up.” (Lk. 18:1 NLT) That’s why disciples of Jesus do. We pray and never give up.

On one occasion, there was a service of baptism at a church where many people publicly affirmed their decision to follow Jesus. The officiating pastor thought his heart would explode with joy. Afterward, he bumped into a woman who was crying. He couldn’t understand how anyone could weep after such a celebration, so he stopped and asked her if she was all right. “No,” she said, “I’m struggling. My mother was baptized today.” The pastor thought to himself, “This is a problem?” The woman continued, “I prayed for her every day for twenty years.” And then she started crying again! “You’re going to have to help me understand this,” the pastor said. “I’m crying,” the woman explained, “because I came so close – so close – to giving up on her. I mean, after 5 years, I said, who needs this? God isn’t listening. After 15 years I said, this is absurd. After 19 years I said, I’m such a fool [to keep on praying]. But I guess I just kept on praying, even though my faith was weak. I kept on praying, and she gave her life to Jesus, and she was baptized today.” The woman paused and looked that pastor in the eye. She said, “I will never doubt the power of prayer again.”

Why don’t some of our prayers get the answer we want? The request itself, the timing, and even we ourselves can be wrong. But God’s help coupled with our refusal to just tolerate a weak, mediocre prayer life will result eventually in many answered prayers as well as the opportunity to partner with God in accomplishing what He wants done in and through us for His glory.